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ABSTRACT

A high school speech communication instructor who also coaches the debate team has drawn a number of conclusions regarding concurrent teaching and coaching. First, forensic programs generally take too much time and energy from classroom work, and an inordinate amount of relaxation and "recharge" time. Forensic coaches who teach need superhuman powers to continue long with the logistics of dealing with the different levels of debate skills and organizing competitions, and at the same time handle classroom paperwork while "on the road." Second, forensic programs may lead coaches to expect that the students they work with so closely in forensics have the same tastes and personality characteristics found in their classroom students. They soon discover, however, that forensic participants tend to be more dedicated to extra hours of work, and to have wider and more eclectic tastes and a more sophisticated level of appreciation for the arts than do classroom students. Third, forensic programs tend to make coaches almost unconsciously expect certain conventionalizations of the forensic world to carry over into classroom speaking. Generally, however, classroom audiences have not been conventionalized in the same manner. Fourth, forensic coaches have the opportunity to become very friendly with team members, but this can inhibit the maturity of participants, and can lead to perceived favoritism in the classroom. Finally, forensic programs stress styles, formats, and purposes that may be at odds with, or at least not include, very legitimate goals of classroom communication instruction. (HTH)

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PRECAUTIONS IN APPLYING FORENSIC EXPERIENCES TO CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Rev. Thomas Meulemans

77th Annual Convention of the Eastern Communication Association
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Apologetical note: The style of this paper is anecdotal, as opposed to scholarly. I hope approach will not invalidate insight.

I became a forensic teacher/coach/director/moderator in the summer of 1961, but my story really begins a year earlier. After four years of part-time teaching during the time I was studying theology leading to my ordination, I was ensconced on the shores of Lake Mendotta at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, drinking deeply of British drama, discussion theory, and medieval and modern theories of rhetoric - expecting to spend the next few years completing a doctorate, then teaching in my Order's seminary and college.

Suddenly, however, my superiors reassigned me, effective Labor Day 1960, from reveries stimulated by Oscar Wilde and Andrew T. Weaver in midwestern serenity, to face the rude, real world of teaching speech to 500 sophomore boys [12 sections with 40 or more students in each] in a large Eastern high school. I was also assigned as attendance officer for 700 students, and was to engage regularly in weekend (and oftentimes weekday) parish ministry as well.

My SECOND year at the school, I was also given charge of the forensic team!

Although I had debated in high school and had once taken Gladys Borchers' forensics short course, the wider world of forensics was pretty much unknown to me - and what I did know left me with a feeling somewhere between "intimidated" and "disgusted." I expected forensic contestants to be less interested in communicating ideas than in pronouncing two t's in "little," New England accents, and orating with the bombast and gesticulation of William Jennings Bryan.

The first months of forensic coaching seemed to justify my low expectations: a native of the area declaimed a cutting of loosely connected dramatic highlights from Clarence Darrow's "Sweet Case" - slipping in-and-out of an English accent every couple of words. With full lung-power, Jonathan Edwards thrust his finger within inches of my face, screaming an angry God's shockingly vivid descriptions of the hell-fire reserved for speech judges and other sinners. A cute 14-year-old "JFK" struggled to remember the next words of his inaugural address, while pimply 16-year-olds solved grey-beard enigmas with pathetic simplicity. Surely the world of forensics was most unreal!

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Two things, however, began happening to me about that time. For one thing, I started to develop a personal relationship with about half of the dozen or so members of the forensic team. That was a very important advancement for me, for the previous year, with the work load and number of students I had, it had been very difficult to get to really KNOW any students.

The second progression, somewhat following from the first, was the dawning of an appreciation of what a forensic program could do --- especially for teenagers in a large impersonal diocesan high school in a lower middle class area of a large city. It became increasingly apparent to me that what seemed to be undesirable characteristics of forensics were not ESSENTIAL to the activity; that it was possible to have a successful high school forensic program that did not contradict my definition of educationally sound communication.

By the time the youngest members of my first team graduated, we had about 60 young men participating in our program. I was assisted by other faculty members as-well-as graduates attending local colleges. I had presided over the diocesan forensic league for two years, had planned and administered numerous tournaments and had been a designer of new definitions of categories, of procedures, regulations, evaluation forms, and strategies on both the local and national levels.

I'm currently teaching my 121st and 122nd sections of basic speech communication; most of these sections have come after my initiation into forensic coaching nearly 25 years ago. I can't really argue against any of the cited values forensic students and teachers receive from the experience. However, let's also examine a few caution areas, as well.

[1] Forensic programs generally take too much time and energy from our other work, and an inordinate amount of our relaxation and re-charge time. It is the rare secondary teacher who has either a modification of schedule or adequate assistance with a forensic program. Coaches have to deal with novices, intermediates, and advanced students (simultaneously) in debate, extemp, interpretation (of several types), original oratory (possibly also persuasive and informative), declamation, discussions, student congresses, broadcasting events, and more. We also recruit, raise money, plan the itineraries, host tournaments, manage budgets, fight the rest of the staff and administration to keep what little perks we have, and try to keep our debaters from pulling each other's hair out. We mark exams and essays in the back of hotel bars and figure out grades on all night buses - mailing them back to school from cities passed through on a greyhound bus enroute to national finals.

After some years of this, our bodies and minds say "enough!" Forensic coaches who teach need superhuman powers to continue long as such. We may still wreck our physical, intellec-

tual, and spiritual health along the way. And we find it next to impossible to find the additional time and energy we need to master the research, study, and re-tooling other educators take for granted.

[2] Forensic programs may lead us to expect that the students we work with so closely in forensics have the same tastes and personality characteristics we would find in our classroom students. After a while, however, we will probably discover that forensic participants tend to be more dedicated to many extra hours of work, to have wider and more eclectic tastes and a more sophisticated level of appreciation of music, literature, and life in general, to be more tolerant of diversity, and [especially] to realistically aspire toward leadership positions in society, and set up plans to attain such goals.

For example, at a time when my school averaged less than 20% going on to college, our forensic program sent almost 100% on - and most of these continued into graduate and professional degrees - and into distinguished careers, especially in the law and education.

If I expect my classroom students to approach life like members of the forensic team, I do them a disservice and am not meeting their needs.

[3] Forensic programs tend to make us almost unconsciously expect certain CONVENTIONALIZATIONS of the forensic world to carry over into classroom speaking. Generally, however, classroom audiences have not been conventionalized in the same manner.

At forensic tournaments most of the members of the audience are other contestants who sit quietly, passively, giving at best nominal attention to the speakers. After rounds there are polite platitudes -- perhaps a few words of praise. What is said deals most often with the impressiveness of the presentation: image, poise, attention-getters, use of body, eyes, voice. Very little attention to CONTENT: apparently no action or re-action obtained [or sought]! Judges look disinterestedly down at ballots or flow sheets.

The classroom speaker generally doesn't see his peers in quite the same competitive sense, and, while he/she surely does want to favorably impress the teacher for mark purposes, and the other students for social acceptance purposes, the emphasis in conversation and written comments after the speech are much more frequently on WHAT was said [content] than on the manner of presentation. My classroom experience also seems to indicate that class members' comments tend to be more open and genuine, and perhaps more genuinely positive than comments from forensic participants [especially comments from participants riding home with you in your car].

It almost seems like we have to re-teach forensic participants how to speak to peers in a classroom situation. When I haven't done this,

my debaters talked too fast and used a vocabulary their classmates didn't understand (and felt was condescending); my speakers impressed their mates with their command of body, voice, and words - but not with their perceived artificiality and insincerity. Both speakers and debaters talked of subjects that were of little immediacy to their fellows. With a very few exceptions, the more competitive a forensic speaker or debater, the less he seemed able to speak "on their level" to peers - both in a speech class, and oftentimes in such general school situations as class and student council election speeches.

[4] Forensic coaches get the opportunity to become very friendly with members of their teams. Generally, this has a quite desirable effect. However, there are two caution situations affecting our classroom presence:

The first situation occurs when less mature speakers [especially those reaching a lot of forensic success at an early age], become overly "familiar" with coaches - generally to their own detriment in terms of maturing as a person, and perhaps to the detriment of the coach and to your program as well.

The second situation results from our friendship with team members leading to real or perceived FAVORITISM. If our students appraise us as "favoring" forensic team members in our classes [whether we actually favor them or not], we're injuring our own ethos, that of the student in question, and that of our program as well.

[5] Forensic programs stress styles, formats, and purposes that may be at odds, or at least not include, very legitimate goals of classroom communication instruction. For example, in the classroom we want to teach our students to stand up and explain how something works or how something is done. For such a task, the use of visual aids is not only useful, but virtually necessary. Yet, in general, most forensic competition even forbids the use of visual aids.

The point is that we must not be too quick to apply the norms of excellence of forensic competition to classroom situations: there may be similarities, but not necessarily.

C O N C L U S I O N

I have gone on quite long. Hopefully I have explored some ideas that someone may find useful. I emphasize again my belief while the forensic experience can be a great help to our classroom experience, the two experiences are really in two different worlds, and that, consequently, there are caveats that we who are both coaches and teachers must be wary of.

I think we all agree with the 1974 National Developmental Conference on Forensics that this is an "educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." And probably most of us also agree with Ron Allen and S. Clay Wilmington who regard the co-curricular speech communication program as designed for a special group of students with special interests and abilities, while a speech teacher's primary responsibility is to develop speech communication instruction to ALL students. In perspective, curricular and co-curricular speech programs mutually aid each other and we profit on both accounts!